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ARTICLE VI.

SPECULATIVE THEOLOGY IN OUR THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES.

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THE age in which we live is not the first that has indulged in speculative thinking, but it may be fairly questioned whether the latter half of the nineteenth century might not, in comparison with other historic periods, be fitly characterized as the age of speculative thought. It is not the purpose of this paper to denounce this speculative tendency as pernicious or unprofitable when rightly directed and limited, nor to urge that, in deference to the public good, its freedom should be restrained, but to consider whether its appropriate field is in the schools consecrated to the work of preparing men to be ministers of the gospel. To vary the statement of our purpose, we might express it in the following query: Does the culture of the habit of speculative thinking bear any such relation to the essential preparation for the work of the ministry that those who go out from the theological seminaries in which speculative thinking takes the widest range, is made most prominent and influential, are for that reason best equipped for the work that is now waiting for the ministry to do? I believe that not even "Progressive Orthodoxy" has yet advanced so far as to claim that the minister of the gospel has any higher mission than to set clearly and forcibly before men the contents of the Holy Scriptures substantially as they have been handed down to us through past centuries. I think that the statement will not be challenged, when I say that the churches of our polity have been chiefly interested in establishing and endowing

their theological seminaries that they might be efficient instrumentalities in imparting to the young men who should resort to them, a large acquaintance with the significance and purpose of the history and doctrines of the Book of books; in imbuing them with their spirit, and in inspiring them with apostolic zeal in obeying the command of the Master, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

The scope of the work that beyond question is germane to the ordinary theological course of three years, including Language, Sacred Literature, Biblical, Christian, and Pastoral Theology, Ecclesiastical History, Church Polity, Relations of Christianity to Secular Sciences—the scope of this work is certainly broad enough to crowd all the available time, and engross all available powers of acquisition and thought. It would then seem to be a necessary inference that all diversion of attention and intellectual power to speculative thinking and its conclusions, must be a subtraction from work of unquestioned utility and pertinence. Is there the slightest probability that such a substitution could result in gain? The Scriptures can hold the historic supremacy which the evangelical churches have assigned to and maintained for them, no longer than the historic faith in their supernatural origin keeps its vigor. This historic supremacy demands that no human speculations should come in competition with its revealed truths. The new light which John Robinson hopefully anticipated, was a light which he expected to break forth from the written word, not a light to be kindled by brilliant and original speculations. Progressive and presuming as theological speculation is, it has not arrogated the claim of being inspired in the divinest sense, and therefore does not ask to be credited with adding to the substance of revelation. But the man of God, in order to become thoroughly furnished with every good work, needs only to be thoroughly conversant with the Scriptures, largely imbued with the spirit which they inculcate, and consumed by a

rational zeal to accomplish the work which they mark out as the appropriate business of Christian apostles.

But speculative thinking not only tends to divert the attention, and absorb the time and power demanded for the mastery of the accepted contents of revelation; it moreover tends to diverge from them until the divergence becomes a wide departure. In this way the orthodox Catholic Church degenerated into the corrupt Romish Church of Luther's day. The speculative thinking of the German theologian Strauss lost sight of all that is divine and true in the person, work, and teachings of Christ, and paraded, as a trophy of original theologic speculation, the discovery that these are mythical, one and all of them. The trend and decided current of speculative thinking among scientific men furnish a strong reason for conservatism in our schools of practical theology. I am aware that some would maintain we must guard against the danger of a widening gap between conservative theology and progressive science. But the sacred responsibilities of those who are set to train men to be successful heralds of the gospel bind them to something far more serious and of more vital moment than the forcing of speculative theology to keep pace with speculative science. When speculative scientists shall have clearly solved all the crucial questions that now baffle and divide them, it will be soon enough for our theological schools to accept the doctrine of evolution as it will appear when disburthened of its improved hypothesis, and then seek to show the harmony between it and Scripture teaching. It is safe to assume that there will be no real conflict between revelation and the latest and largest scientific truth. I do not here vouch for the harmony between the inferences of theologians and scientists, but only between truths of revelation and truths of science.

The intrusion of Speculative Theology into our Theological Seminaries is to be deprecated because of its Tendency—

I. To exalt reason above inspiration—the natural above the supernatural. Does not the affirmation of this tendency receive a striking confirmation in the claims put forth by

“The New Theology” or “Progressive Orthodoxy”? It maintains that the advances which it has made upon the theology which up to the date of this new departure had formed the working basis of the professed disciples of Christ in their endeavors to obey the mandate of their Master, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,” represent truth which must now be accepted, else the ways of God in dealing with men cannot be justified; else the Christian scheme cannot be defended against the charge of self-contradiction; else the conditions of inevitable failure cannot be eliminated from its practical working. And yet the statements that differentiate “progressive orthodoxy” from orthodoxy without the adjective do not express the contents of revelation, but only speculative inferences therefrom. What, then, is the essence of this claim if it is not that human reason has formulated an inferential theology, far superior in symmetry, consistency, and practical working qualities, to any theology that has strictly limited itself to the contents of revelation? And what, pray, is this but to exalt reason above inspiration—the natural above the supernatural?

II. Again, the intrusion of speculative theology into our theological seminaries is to be deprecated, because of its tendency to make men ambitious to devise new doctrines and new systems, rather than to acquire larger power in the presentation of those accepted by the churches. History has proved what might have been readily inferred from the easy drift of human tendencies, that the peculiar danger which besets those who occupy commanding positions for the shaping and directing of religious thought, is the strong temptation to gain a following by the promulgation of some attractive novelty. What has been the outcome of this tendency in the theological schools of Europe, especially of Germany, during the last half century? From them has emanated an irregular succession of theological rockets, whose brilliant teachings have for a little season attracted and dazzled, and then expired in deepened darkness. So far as the power to draw a following of students is concerned, the magnetic centre

has shifted from one school to another, but neither the local nor the remote result has been to raise the standard of piety or increase the evangelizing power of the ministry. Those who feel that these latter elements of power are the same with which the ministry of to-day most need to be endowed in larger measures, cannot but regard with serious apprehension any tendency of our theological schools to conform to the German type. The danger attending the indulgence in speculative theology is great in proportion to the ability and prominence of the men who are given to it. There are at least two personal reasons for this: 1. The mental exercise involved has a special fascination for minds gifted with fertility of invention and logical power; 2. Then when a new view has been put before the public, there is a maximum personal motive for maintaining it. This motive tends to generate an absorbing zeal proportioned to the resistance encountered, and so both the direct and the indirect influence works against the highest purposes of these schools. Is there any reasonable doubt that this view of the matter is sustained by the current of events having its fountain and impetus in the recent theological speculation in theological schools?

III. Again, the intrusion of theological speculation into our theological seminaries is to be deprecated because of its tendency to encourage scepticism rather than overcome it. In every department of knowledge there are ultimate facts the mystery of which the human reason cannot fathom; for whose origin and mode of causation it is inadequate to account. In the realm of theology such facts are prominent and fundamental. The absolute inability of the reason by searching to find them out is the occasion and ground of revelation. The most positive belief in such facts that is ever attained, is reached by the acceptance of them through unquestioning faith as they are presented by revelation. If any man should question the validity of the testimony of consciousness, as to his personal entity, his scepticism could not be relieved by repeating the enthymeme of Descartes; *Cogito, ergo sum*, since a complete *petitio principii* is involved in the

subjective *ego*; so that it may well be doubted whether there is as much virtue in the repetition of the triplet of words, *cogito, ergo sum*, to deepen the conviction of the personal entity, as there is in the triple repetition *ego, ego, EGO*.

Not less completely am I convinced that the firmness and practical value of that belief in one God as the creator of the world, and of everything having life, which springs from the acceptance by faith of the teachings of the first chapter of Genesis, has never been produced by human reasonings upon the necessity of a first cause, upon the evidences of design, or upon the universality of the sense of subjective dependence. But the historic drift of speculative thought, save when it has been dominated by a reverent regard for the ultimate authority of these divinely established truths, and has been bounded by them, has been toward the discrediting of all doctrine that has not been sought out, comprehended, and sanctioned by human reason. The result has uniformly been a constant and rapidly increasing divergence of two representative trends of thought—the one embracing those doctrines of philosophy and practice approved by the profoundest convictions of men, in harmony with revealed truth and sanctioned by abundant good fruits; the other embracing categories of heterogeneous vagaries, oftentimes self-contradictory and mutually destructive, revealing their true character by the rank growth of sensuality, lawlessness, and impiety that have sprung up under their nurturing influence. As striking illustrations of this tendency as it works in individual minds, we may cite Strauss in Germany and Renan in France. But in its wider reach we may see it in the long expanding outgrowth of the speculations of John Locke. This is all the more pertinent and instructive because Locke himself was a Puritan in faith and sympathies. Doubtless he was a sincere searcher for truth, and could his errors have proceeded no further than he ventured to follow them, the major part of the evil fruits would never have appeared. But, if one has been instrumental in weakening an embankment that holds in check pent-up floods, it is not always an easy

matter to stop the flow when once the insidious waters have found the outlet ; and so Hartley and Hume in England, Condillac and Helvetius in France, working out to a remoter logical result the data furnished by Locke, practically eliminate God from their theology, righteousness from ethics, and the soul from man.

Speculative thought that has travailed at the birth of evolution has already declared that the unconditioned is unknowable, and the most tangible thing that it can offer as a substitute for the Christian's satisfying assurance of the omnipresence and overruling sovereignty of an all-wise and infinitely loving Father, is the faint conjecture that there is somewhere a somewhat that makes for righteousness. Possibly the "New Departure" of our own time has not yet advanced far enough to make it practicable to measure the angle of divergence between orthodoxy unqualified and progressive orthodoxy, but certain it is that other associations, ecclesiastical and otherwise, agreeing in the rejection of doctrines that have been regarded as essential to orthodoxy, are made jubilant by the apparent movement of "progressive orthodoxy" toward their respective camps.

IV. The intrusion of speculative theology into our theological seminaries is to be deprecated because of its tendency to develop a religion of the head and literature, rather than of the heart and life.

The proper work of the ministry is to help in bringing in the kingdom of God. To do this effectively it must be filled with, and controlled by, the spirit and purposes of Christ. This needs to be so largely true of them that those who but touch the hem of their garments shall receive virtue from the contact, and come under the constraining power of divine love. A ministry so imbued is not the natural product of a theological training shaped by minds largely given to speculative theology. It is a law of our being that the emotions whose mission it is to generate the decisions of the will are not aroused by what appeals to them as only probable. They respond only to the clear conviction of absolute truth. The

emotions that move the will to act upon the momentous concerns of Christian life and work, lie deep down at the very foundations of the soul, and are effectually stirred only by the clearest and strongest convictions of truth buttressed and vouched for by a "Thus saith the Lord" in the unmistakable and inimitable handwriting of a personal God.

The traditional training of our theological schools has given excessive prominence to the literary and philosophical over the strictly biblical and spiritual, so that they have left it for their graduates themselves to gather by experiment the essential qualifications for their most important work. Under these conditions it is not strange that some earnest men, discarding the cumbersome theological armor, and filling their wallets with the smooth stones of gospel truth, and sending them with the sling of plain and earnest speech, have slain Goliaths that had long defied platoons of cultured theologues.

When experience has so plainly shown what have been the causes of past failure, and the times imperatively demand a large increase in the positiveness and efficiency of Christian work, the churches should with one voice call upon our theological schools to remedy deficiencies that already exist, that they may send out men strong in the faith that is to convert men, and thoroughly grounded in the truth that hitherto has alone proved adequate to persuade sinful men that "now is the accepted time," the only proffered day of grace. Any new departure should be in this direction, and not in the direction of larger and more abundant speculation.